Livin' It

Viral Load

What is it?
Why is it so important?

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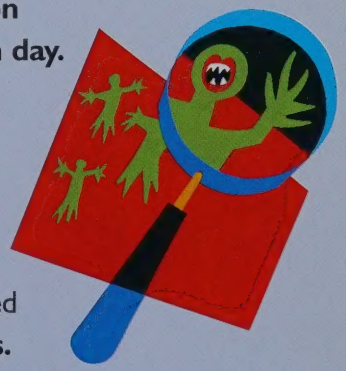
What is a virus?

A **virus** is a tiny, but powerful germ in the body. A virus fights healthy cells in the body. When this happens, people become sick.

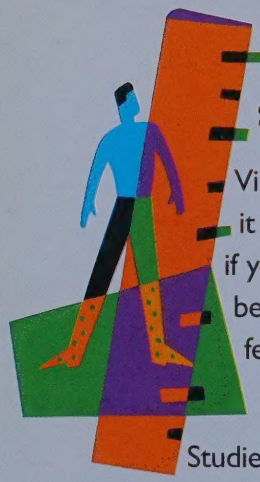
What is HIV?

HIV is the virus that causes AIDS. When HIV gets in your body, it makes many copies of itself, very fast. In fact, **this virus can make as many as 10 billion copies of itself each day.** To fight off HIV, your body makes about 2 billion "helper" or "messenger" cells every day. These "helper cells" are called **CD4 cells,** or **T cells.** When there is too much HIV in your blood, more and more CD4 cells die. The body becomes too weak to fight back, and AIDS may start.



What is viral load?

Viral load is a number that tells you how many copies of the virus are in each milliliter (mL) of your blood. An undetectable viral load doesn't mean that there's no HIV in your blood—it means that there is so little HIV that the test can't measure it.



Why is viral load so important?

Viral load (or viral level, as it is also called) can tell you if your HIV is getting worse or better, even if you are not feeling sick.

Studies show that…

- When people have high viral loads soon after being infected with HIV, they seem to get AIDS much faster than people with low viral loads early on.
- Keeping viral loads low may keep HIV from getting worse quickly.

Remember:

HIV medicines are not a cure for HIV or AIDS. People taking HIV medicines can still get infections or other conditions related to HIV. They can still give HIV to others by sex or by having their infected blood mix with the blood of people who do not have HIV. It is very important for all HIV patients to keep seeing their doctor.

HIV treatment…

Keeping viral load as low as possible, as long as possible

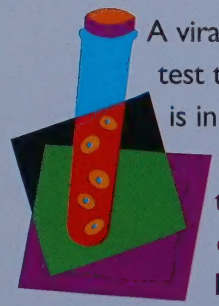
Many doctors look at <u>both</u> viral loads and **CD4 counts** (the number of CD4 cells in your body) to decide the best way to treat HIV.

An undetectable viral load and higher CD4 counts are the best indication that treatment is working.

If your viral load is going up, your doctor may talk to you about starting or changing your medicines.

Ask your doctor about different treatment choices that can bring down viral load.

How is viral load measured?



A viral load test is a simple blood test that measures how much HIV is in your blood. Your blood will be drawn, and a lab will count the virus in the blood. Viral load can be as low as 50 or more than 1 million copies per milliliter.

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Reimbursement assistance and viral load test information

Toll-free information for patients and healthcare providers

PCR Testing
Roche Diagnostic Systems, Inc.
AMPLICOR HIV-1 MONITOR™
(888) TEST PCR
(837-8727)
Monday - Friday
8:30 AM - 5 PM, Eastern Standard Time

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When should viral load be measured?

Many doctors now think that viral load should be used with **CD4 counts** (how many CD4 cells are in your body) to figure out when to start or change treatment.

For your first test: If this is your first viral load measurement, your doctor will probably give you 2 tests, 2 to 4 weeks apart.

Regularly: After getting your first viral load readings, your doctor may test your viral loads and CD4 counts every 3 to 4 months.

After starting or changing treatment: Once you start HIV treatment—or if there is any change in the medicines you are taking—your doctor may test your viral load 3 to 4 weeks later, to see how well you are doing.

Knowing your viral load is very important to fighting HIV!

Ask your doctor about knowing and checking your viral load.

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